

Guidelines and Criteria for Evaluating Web Pages

How do you know if information from a Web page is likely to be accurate and credible?

Publishers and/or editorial boards usually decide if books and articles meet minimum standards of accuracy and credibility that make them worthy enough to be published. However, anyone can create a Web page with no screening at all, so it is extremely important to evaluate information from the Internet.

The questions below should be asked when evaluating any web page. They provide useful guidelines and criteria to help you evaluate the quality and credibility of Web pages.

1) Who is the author that created the page?

Responsible Web publications should identify the creator of the information in a readily visible place on the page. Is the author an individual or an organization? Is no author given?

- If one or more **individuals** have written the page, is biographical information about the author(s) available?
 - What are the author's QUALIFICATIONS or CREDENTIALS? What is his/her/their background in terms of education, experience, occupation, position, affiliation, publications, etc. Do these make him/her/they an expert?
 - Can you discern anything about the CREDIBILITY or REPUTATION of the author?
 - Do a *Google* search of the author's name. Can you find web pages that provide reliable information about the person? (*LinkedIn* pages can be a good place to find someone's experience and education.)
 - For academic sources, authors should have an **M.A. or Ph.D.** degree in the subject area of the source or they should be a **professional journalist** with experience writing for reputable publications (magazines or newspapers)

2) What is the overall nature and purpose of the website (or the sponsoring organization or publication)?

- What is the basic purpose of the site? To inform? Explain? Persuade? Market a product? Advocate a cause? Satirize a person, organization, or idea? Are the history, nature, and/or purpose of the page/site described?
 - Look for a link to "HOME" (or the title of the larger website) and click on it
 - Look for a link such as "About", "About Us", or "Who We Are" to find a description and background of the organization, publication or site, including its purpose, history and who are its leaders.
 - Is it a relatively impartial group (like a university or government agency) or a group established to promote certain ideas or a point of view (e.g. non-profit organizations or a political party)?
 - Do a *Google* search of the organization's name. Can you find web pages (e.g. a *Wikipedia* article) that provide reliable information about the organization?
 - If there's no "home" link, try shortening the URL one subdirectory at a time and pressing <Enter>. This will sometimes bring you to the larger website that your page is part of.
- Identify the **domain type** within the URL. This is a key factor when evaluating a site since it often indicates the type of site where the information originated. The most common domain types:
 - **.edu**: college or university (usually reliable, but can range from scholarly research to students' personal pages)
 - **.gov**: a government body (usually very reliable, but sometimes may have a political bias)
 - **.org**: a non-profit organization (may have very good information but may be promoting particular ideas)
 - **.com**: a commercial enterprise (may be trying to sell or promote a product or service or display advertising, but also can be websites of very credible organizations or publications, e.g. *nytimes.com*)

3) What can you discern about the content of the page or Website?

Criteria 1: Length and substance of the text: Does this page provide a substantive, in-depth discussion of the topic, or merely a cursory, superficial overview? Is this a brief “sound-bite,” or a longer, more in-depth analysis?

Criteria 2: Author’s purpose: Is this a straightforward summary or overview of the topic, such as you would find in an encyclopedia article? Or is the author presenting a new interpretation, view, or explanation of the topic?

Criteria 3: Academic quality and reading level of the text: Is this a serious, complex, detailed, academic treatment of the topic, or is it lighter “popular” discussion geared for the general public?

Criteria 4: Sources & Documentation: Where did the author gather the information presented? Was it from original research, experiments, observation, interviews, books and documents? If lots of factual information is given, does the author cite his/her sources? Verify that the author used authoritative sources to back up his/her arguments and conclusions.

Criteria 5: Originality of the text: Is this original writing, or is it copied and compiled from other sources and websites? Is this primarily a list of links?

Criteria 6 : Objectivity: Is the text primarily personal opinion rather than an objective discussion? If the text is primarily opinion, is this clearly stated, i.e. is the author clear about the fact that he/she is presenting a subjective view of the topic? Does the author acknowledge that there might be other worthy points of view? Does the site show signs of any political, ideological, cultural, or personal biases?
Is the site presenting an extremist or wildly unorthodox view?

Criteria 7: Currency: Is the information or the site itself out of date?

Criteria 8: Writing style: Is the content free of grammatical, spelling, and typographical errors?